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ABSTRACT

This digest about issues currently being debated in the adult literacy field examines the appropriate goals and objectives for adult literacy education, professionalization of the field, and literacy program evaluation. The first section reflects the disagreement between those who believe the purpose of literacy education should be to support economic development by preparing citizens for employment and for effective performance in a high-productivity economy and those who believe that the purpose of literacy education should relate more to liberating people for intelligent, meaningful, and humane action in the world. In the section on professionalization of the field, the digest discusses a number of factors (the use of volunteer tutors, the need for an integrated system to support professional development, and a lack of consensus about what level of education and training is needed for effective performance) that have converged to direct interest to the professionalism issue during the 1980's. The section on evaluation of adult literacy programs calls for knowledgeable professionals to develop more effective evaluation of literacy programs, but recognizes the difficulty of defining goals for the evaluation of such programs when the purpose and goals for adult literacy in general have not been set. The digest concludes with 12 references. (CML)

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Clearinghouse on Adult, Career, and Vocational Education

ADULT LITERACY ISSUES: AN UPDATE

During the 1980s, increasing the literacy rate of adult Americans has been the focus of national attention. President Reagan's announcement of the Adult Literacy Initiative in September 1983 stimulated a number of new initiatives in adult literacy education, many of which focused on strengthening literacy education programs through the recruitment of volunteers. Several issues related to the adult literacy movement surfaced during the early part of the decade including the definition of adult literacy, characteristics of illiterate adults, the purposes of literacy education, the use of volunteers in literacy education programs, the impact of changing technology on literacy skills needed to function in the workplace, the need for more effective evaluation mechanisms, and the need for better linkages and communication within the field of adult literacy education (Fingeret 1984, Miller and Imel 1987).

As the decade draws to a close, several new emphases related to adult literacy education have emerged. These include efforts to influence the development of policy, and the evolution of new types of programs including family or intergenerational literacy; workplace literacy; and literacy for immigrants, for the homeless, for women, and for welfare recipients (Imel 1988). A majority of the issues that surfaced earlier are still unresolved, but new issues have surfaced and debates about some older issues have intensified as a result of the new emphases.

A previous **ERIC Digest** (Imel and Grieve [1984]) describes some of the early issues enumerated by Fingeret (1984) and later by Miller and Imel (1987). This **ERIC Digest** examines the following three issues that are the focus of debate in the current context: the appropriate focus for adult literacy education, professionalization of the field, and program evaluation.

Purpose and Goals

The economic climate of the 1980s has established a connection between literacy and economic development and "provided the framework within which we see the current attention to literacy education" (Fingeret 1988, p. 2). Concern about the nation's ability to maintain its competitiveness in a changing world market and an increasingly technological environment has exacerbated the debate about the goals and purposes of adult literacy education. The debate centers around whether the adult literacy education should serve economic development goals or whether it should be an empowering process that takes into account adult learner social backgrounds, needs, and purposes.

Jump Start (Chisman 1989), the highly publicized report recommending policy directions for adult literacy, strongly emphasizes the need for literacy to support economic development. According to the report, "the problem of adult basic skills" in the nation is so severe that the goal should clearly be to "ensure that by the year 2000, or soon thereafter, every adult has the skills needed to perform effectively the tasks required by a high-productivity economy, to the best of his or her ability" (p. 3).

Fingeret (1988) and Kazemek (1988) argue that highlighting the role of literacy in economic development places the blame for the nation's economic problems on non- or low-literate adults. The literacy for economic development perspective overlooks the fact that "structural inequalities such as unemployment are built into our social and economic systems" (Kazemek 1988, p. 473).

According to Kazemek (ibid.), too narrow a goal for literacy education ignores the perspective that literacy should have as its goal "the liberation of people for intelligent, meaningful and humane action upon the world" (p. 466). It also disregards the results of outcome studies revealing that the majority of participants enroll in adult basic education programs for educational rather than employment reasons (Fingeret 1985).

In order to reconcile these two opposing perspectives about the goal and purposes of literacy education, Fingeret (1988) suggests that "we must work together to promote a broad notion of literacy that embraces the growth of the human spirit, recognizing that full participation in the economy will accompany such personal growth" (p. 5).

Professionalization of the Field

The issue of how and why the field of adult literacy education should professionalize is currently under discussion. Although this issue has been debated by the larger field of adult education for more than two decades, developments in adult literacy education during the 1980s have sharpened the deliberations. A number of factors have converged to direct attention to the professionalization issue. These include the use of volunteer tutors, the need for an integrated system to support professional development, and a lack of consensus on what level of education and training is necessary for effective performance (Foster 1988, Kazemek 1988).

Adult illiteracy's status as a national issue has forced public acknowledgement that there are inadequate institutional and financial resources to support the development of professionals in the field. Although most adult literacy personnel have been aware of this situation for years, they now have an opportunity to participate in determining which direction professionalization of the field should take. If they do not choose to take advantage of this opportunity, standards may be imposed externally (Imel 1988).

An unresolved question, however, is how the field should professionalize. Cervero (1987) suggests that rather than professionalize like other professions, adult education should develop a model of professionalization that is consistent with its underlying belief structure. Foster (1988) expresses a similar belief: "[U]nlike some other professions . . . the professional activities associated with

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adult literacy should not revolve around certification or restricting entry into the profession. Instead, the profession will have to be more experimental and open to innovation" (p. 21).

Evaluation of Adult Literacy Programs

The need for better, more effective evaluation of adult literacy programs and practices has been recognized for some time. Because adult literacy programs are different from the traditional school programs that teach children to read and write, they cannot be evaluated in the same way (Foster 1988, "Myth #7: Literacy Programs Are Fail-Safe" 1988). However, it is not clear how programs should be evaluated. Related to this are questions about the purposes and goals of evaluation.

Because of the connection of adult literacy to economic development goals, many evaluation studies have focused on outcomes. Fingeret (1985) feels that outcome studies are limited because they assume that the goal of literacy is employment when, in fact, participants frequently cite other kinds of goals. She suggests that the goal of literacy program evaluation should be broadened to include information about "the internal processes and dynamics of programs" (p.13). Broadening the approach to evaluation will help teachers and administrators acquire a better perspective on learners and their potential (Jones and Lowe 1986).

The pressure for better, more effective evaluation procedures is coming from both internal and external sources. Although adult literacy educators are dissatisfied with current efforts, the heightened awareness of the extent of adult illiteracy has increased demand from the public for greater accountability. Just as they should in the area of professionalization, adult literacy professionals, who know and understand the field, need to determine the purposes and goals of evaluation.

Conclusion

Although discussed separately, there are similarities among the three issues treated in this **Digest**. All have been debated by the profession for some time, but each has intensified as a result of the increased visibility of adult literacy education. By being proactive, rather than reactive, individuals within the profession can do much to determine the eventual resolution of each of the issues.

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